Early Black residents of Peel County: Three Profiles

Region of Peel Archives
2026

Emeline Shadd

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This e-book includes one instance of historic language that some may find distressing or triggering. The word used was chosen by a Black abolitionist author in 1855, to refer to the ethnicity of his sister, however may be considered unacceptable today. The purpose of archives is to preserve historical records for future generations. Records are kept as created, unaltered.

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Cover images:
Signature of Emeline Shadd. Library and Archives Canada, R4182-17-5-E.
Charles and Hattie Kelly, ca. 1910. Courtesy of Guelph Museums, 1978.16.5.
John Gilbert Bush, Ancestry user Wmdlife2012.

Foreword

In recent years, the Region of Peel Archives has undertaken research into the lives of early Black residents of Peel County, now Peel Region.

With the exception of Heritage Mississauga's research for their community, previous researchers approached the county in limited ways. They either examined Black settlement only in relation to broader continental, national, or provincial trends, or identified the names of early Black residents in censuses without consulting other local resources that could reveal their lives before and after they lived in Peel.

Each of the biographies in this ebook were compiled using many discrete resources, all publicly available.

We used documents in the Archives' collection, items in the collections of other archives including Library and Archives Canada, and from other resources like newspapers and passing references in the local history books of other communities. Slowly but surely, individual facts or stories became fleshed-out lives.

Emeline's story has been told before, but those accounts are fragmentary, focusing on only parts of her life. Where possible, the version in this book is presented from original sources.

Privacy legislation means that the Canadian census isn't released until 95 years after its creation. The 2023 release of the 1931 Canadian census led to the discovery of John Gilbert Bush. While the Peel Museum included him on a panel about porters in their 2024 to 2026 exhibition *All Aboard! The Railways of Peel*, this is the first extensive coverage of his life.

Charles Kelly's brother, who ran a barber shop in Brampton, was known for many years through the census. But Charles himself never lived in the city on a census year. It's only by searching for William H. Kelly in local papers that Charles' life was discovered, thanks to digitization by Brampton Library and Newspapers.com.

The intention of this publication is to raise awareness of three historic Black lives, and to provide a deeper understanding of their contributions in Peel and beyond. Hopefully it will inspire others to try their own research. Indeed, the book includes sections under each biography, listing "Further opportunities for research." Or perhaps relatives of Black residents may make their family archival material available to the public, either online or through an archive. Peel is made richer when it knows its past.

Mississauga

John Gilbert Bush

John Gilbert Bush was born 23 June 1873 in Oro Township, Simcoe County. He was born to Mary Bush, née Handy, and her husband Mark.

The Bush family farmed at Lot 11, Concession 6 Oro Township, and John's father Mark, also known as Elder Bush, was the last person to lead services at the Oro African Methodist Episcopal Church. Now a National Historical Site, it is "one of, if not, the oldest African log church still standing in North America." The church reopened in 2016, after restorations. As of 2026, the grounds are open to the public.

Mark Bush. Via Ancestry user twshreve1960

Did you know?

Veterans of the War of 1812 received land grants for their service in defending Canadian sovereignty against an American president bent on expansionism. A militia known as The Coloured Corps fought at the Battle of Queenston Heights and the Battle of Fort George, and helped build Fort Mississauga at Niagara-on-the-Lake. Their land grants were in Oro Township, just north of Barrie, Ontario. As a result, the area developed a strong, continuous Black community over multiple generations.

Simcoe County Archives has an online exhibition on The Wilberforce Street Settlement.

Working as a porter

John married Louise Robinson on 15 November 1899 in the City of Toronto. Louise was from New Lowell, Simcoe County.

By the start of his second marriage (to Bella Lajeunesse in 1909), he was working as a porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway.

John married Bella on 3 November 1909. Her family was from Ottawa, and records indicate that she was white and born in Quebec. Their residences in Toronto included Leslie Street (1911), and 51 Edward Street (1921). The 1921 census shows they lived with Jamaica-born Clorins Neilson, also a railway employee, his wife, and two children.

John Bush. Via Ancestry user Wmdlife2012.

In Peel

In about 1923, the couple moved to Lakeview, in Toronto Township, now Mississauga.

On the 1931 census, Bush is employed as a porter for the Canadian National Railway. The Bushes were living on Alexandra Street. While both husband and wife were Methodists on the 1911 census, John was now an Anglican, and Bella had turned to Roman Catholicism, likely the religion of her youth in Quebec.

As of 1948, the Bushes lived on 3rd Street, Lakeview. On April 2 that year, after a quarter century in the community, John Gilbert Bush died. According to a notice in the newspaper, "Employed for some 40 years with the Canadian National Railways, Mr.

Bush had been ill for the past six years. He is survived by his wife, two sisters, and a brother in Jamaica."

J. G. BUSH

Funeral services were conducted on April 5th for J. G. Bush, for 25 years a resident of the Lakeview area, who passed away at his Third Street home following an extended illness.

Employed for some 40 years with the Canadian National Railways, Mr. Bush had been ill for the past six years. He is survived by his wife, two sisters, and a brother in Jamacia.

Services were conducted by Rev. E. T. Holt, pastor of Alliance Tabernacle, from the funeral chapel of Skinner and Middlebrook. Interment was in Park Lawn cemetery.

The Port Credit Weekly, April 15, 1948.

His death registration says that John had a hypertensive heart for ten years, leading to a cerebral hemorrhage for five months.

John Gilbert Bush's service was performed by a minister from The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada, an offshoot of the Presbyterian Church. He was interred in Park Lawn Cemetery, Etobicoke. There is no headstone.

Further reading

Library and Archives Canada podcast Porter Talk, episode 1, episode 2, episode 3.

Sleeping Car Porters in Canada, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

Black sleeping car porters, Canadian Museum of Human Rights.

They Call Me George: The Untold Story of Black Train Porters and The Birth of Modern Canada, available at Mississauga Library System, at Brampton Library, and at Caledon Public Library

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Oro Historical Committee, *The story of Oro*, [Oro Station, ON] : Corporation of the Township of Oro, 1972, page 136; accessible on Internet Archive through a Trent University Library donation.

1911 Canadian census, 1921 Canadian census, 1931 Canadian census.
"Obituaries," *The Port Credit Weekly*, 15 April 1948, page 5.
"Registration of death" for John Gilbert Bush, filed 2 April 1948, accessible on Ancestry.
"Registration of death" for John Gilbert Bush, filed 2 April 1948, accessible on Ancestry.
"Card of Thanks," The Port Credit Weekly, 8 April 1948, page 6. 1921-1924 volumes of Might City directory for Toronto.

Thank you to historian Janie Cooper-Wilson for confirming some of this information.

Thanks also to Park Lawn Company Limited for the burial information.

Further opportunities for research

Online: Newspapers.com recently digitized *The Advertiser*, a paper covering Mimico and New Toronto, which goes back to 1927. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be additional references to John in that paper.

At Region of Peel Archives: Toronto Township voters' lists may reveal where on Alexandria Avenue and Third Street that Bush lived with his wife. Surviving lists during John's lifetime were created in 1935, 1938, 1939, 1945, 1946, 1947, and 1948.

Either online or at the Archives: If the couple owned a house, Toronto Township property abstracts would reveal where Bush lived with his wife on Alexandria Avenue and Third Street. Township rolls survive annually after 1928.

At other archives: CPR and CNR employment ledgers may survive at other archival collections.

People: Relatives of the Bush family may have additional information.

Caledon

Emeline Shadd

Emeline Shadd was born in 1835 in Pennsylvania, to Harriet and Abraham Shadd.

Many of Emeline's relatives were noted abolitionists of the era, including her father Abraham Shadd. He was the first Black man to be elected to municipal government in Canada, specifically in Raleigh, Ontario. Her sister, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, was also a noted abolitionist publisher.

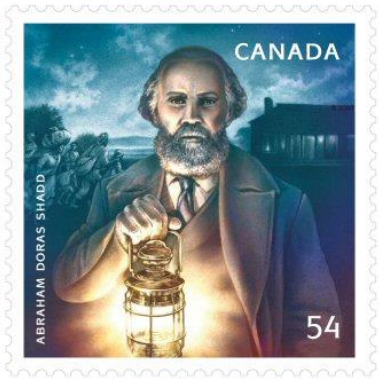
The earliest years of education in Canada West (Ontario), teachers were generally someone educated in the community. It was only in 1847 that the area's first teacher's college, Toronto Normal School, was created.

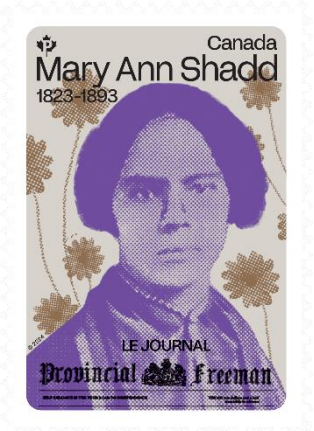
In autumn 1855, the *Provincial Freeman* reported:

> At the close of the recent Session of the Normal School, at Toronto, Miss Emeline Shadd, a colored lady, received the first prize of £5 10s.; also, a first class certificate. Miss Shadd is a sister of Miss M. A. Shadd, who filled the editorial chair of the Provincial Freeman for the past year, and daughter of Abram D. Shadd, Esq., of Raleigh Township, Kent. Co., C. W., and formerly of West Chester, Pa.

(By 1855, Mary Ann's brother Isaac was editor of the *Provincial Freeman*. Her sister and sister-in-law also had short stints as editor.)

Her graduation with honours was part of a significant generational shift in, as one of the first generation of formally trained teachers in what is now Ontario.





Emeline's father, Abraham Doras Shadd, and a sister, Mary Ann Shadd, have both been featured on Canadian postage stamps.

Images courtesy of Canada Post, 2009, 2024.

Toronto Normal School
City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1498 (Armstrong, Beere and Hime photographs of Toronto), item 8.

Emeline in Peel

Shadd's first job from 1858 to 1860 was teaching at a school somewhere in northern Peel County, but its identity is still a mystery despite some conjectures and clues:

- Library and Archives Canada's database says that she taught in Caledon Township, which is now the northwest corner of the Town of Caledon.

- Of three postmarks on the envelope of a surviving letter written by her (see below), only one is in Peel, "Edmonton." This is the historic name for Snelgrove, which is now Hurontario Street and Mayfield Road.

- The letter references "Donald" going to Sligo P.O., which is the Sligo post office. That's now McLaughlin Road and Forks of the Credit Road. It is within historic Caledon Township.

While the Region of Peel Archives has the surviving school records of Peel's historic one-room schoolhouses, none of them in these areas are early enough to reference Shadd. As well, no local newspaper from this era survives.

Whatever the case, Emeline Shadd was Peel's first Black female teacher. She was preceded by Spencer D. Mishaw at Bolton, 1855 to 1858, to be profiled in the future.

Library and Archives Canada has a letter she wrote to her sister describing her experience in Caledon.

18
Caledon
Come ye that Love the L March 1858
M. C. Emmyann
Dear Sister Shadd Ann

Blessing in a strange part of the country to one and thinking perhaps you would like to hear from me I will give you a wee bit at me mind [evcessing?] my position here also the ways and habits of the people around about the Township of Caledon County of Peel. You will perhaps judge from the name that it is Scottish enough and you will judge right for the "Galic" is being spoken on every side.

During the Roman occupation of Scotland, the area north of the River Forth was known as Caledonia. The name originated from one of the two tribal confederacies in the area. More than a millennia later, by the time Emeline was writing this letter, "Caledon" was a poetic term for Scotland.

The people with whom I am at present boarding are Highlanders and know very little but the Galic Language as it the case with many others around here: they are very ? or appear so we have the table blessed, family prayers, Xe, Xe, and all the time I cannot comprehend more than half a dozen words of that.

The country about is very hilly, about like the worst parts of Chester County, and the people are rough according but generous, kind, socialable and lively, ever ready for a [hoe?], a [space?], a wedding or any such place where a violin is [that?] can produce a tune (a gigg or a reel or the like of [? ?] which every girl is expected [to?] [jump?].

The Shadd family originated in West Chester, Chester County, Pennsylvania.

The people are [slow?] many of them old settlers the [County?] is mostly well cleared up, and few [?] or anything but their own land, added [to?] that many are worth thousands of pound of [and? in?] solid each in solid land spreading far and wide.

Treaty 19, also known as the Adjatence Purchase, was signed in 1818. By the time Emeline arrived to teach, some of the farmers would be forty years into their ownership of the land.

I have had the school open here just six weeks but it is small owing to the snow being so deep that the roads are impassible for the wee bairns as even those who are coming are mostly brought in sleighs ? ? is but one lot. I like it very well thus far and hope that time may not prove to the ?.

Road maintenance was the responsibility of the farmers whose land fronted the street. There was no public works department, and the Ontario Good Roads Association wasn't founded until 1894.

I had the good luck to meet last Sabbath at church with a student (a girl) who was at the Normal School last winter -- she was very glad to see me and gave me warm invitation to come and see her at her fathers' about six miles distant, where she is teaching. I am just opposite the school. The people are poor but very respectable and it is very hand [to one?], he is a shoemaker & Plasterer but it makes no difference on the account of the [company they keep the best there is rich or poor.

Emeline goes on to mention a Hannah, soon after this section. Hannah and this classmate may be two different people, as there's no one by that name in Emeline's graduating class at the Toronto Normal School.

We (Hannah & I) went to church last Sabbath in McGregor sleigh there were eleven in so you may judge of the size, [but?] old people fours girls, five young men & [Leavey? load] that it was ? up ?, then down in the snow on
one side then right-side up with care. [Wolcohn?] was wishing are would aspect said he would give a [gnarler?] - xe, xe.

Sabbath means a day for religious observance, and pausing work.

"xe, xe." was another way to write "etc."

You would ? said he would give were all crazy according to our ideas of [propriety?] it is just like it used to be among our ignorant country people at home, no person ever receives an introduction each "scrapes an acquaintance" and I assure you it will be done in double quick time and with a hearty good will.

I do not know what else I can say it is nearly schooltime now but Donald is going to Sligo P.O. today for the papers where you must address one should you be good enough to write. I was not at church before last Sabbath but now I suppose by way of competition the other McGregors (the are [two sets]) have given me an invitation this week for next day.

We don't know who Donald was.

Sligo was a community at what is now McLaughlin and Forks of the Credit Road in Caledon.

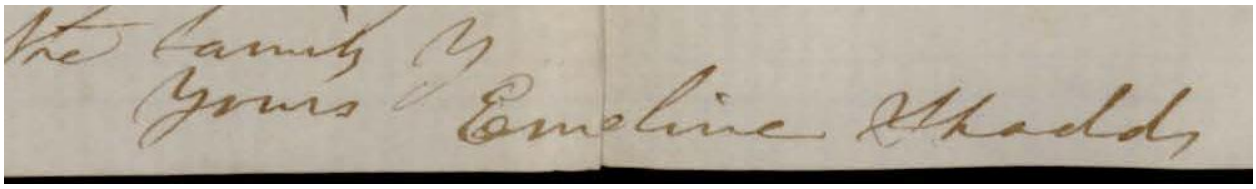
And now a few questions. How is Davy, and the little ones also how are they? How are you enjoying your state of [John Ile?] bleessedness? Well I suppose. Have you heard from Mrs. Cary? I saw [Tom?] when I was in the City he worked like a dog with ? ?.

Mary Ann Shadd, Emeline's abolitionist publisher sister, was married to Thomas F. Cary in 1856.

Love to all the family.

Yours
Emeline Shadd

Curator and author Adrienne Shadd has written a biography of Mary Ann for The Canadian Encyclopedia.



Library and Archives Canada, Mary Ann Shadd Cary collection, R4182-17-5-E. Access the original letter on the website of Library and Archives Canada.

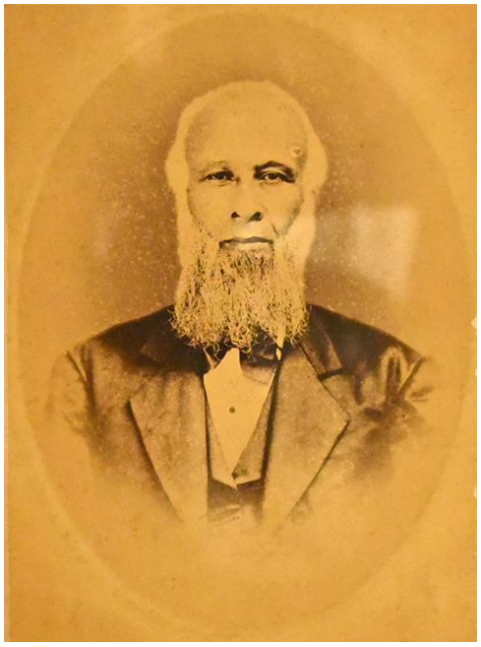
Teaching in Oxford County

Shadd moved to western Ontario in 1861, becoming the first teacher at School Section No. 13, Harwich, a school in Shrewsbury, Blenheim Township, Oxford County.

According to a book by the Historical Society of Blenheim & District, "her granddaughter Mrs. Marion (Simpson) Griffith, [later] taught there until she married," and according to Arlie C. Robbin's *Legacy to Buxton*, the school's final teacher when it closed in the 1960s was Saxonia Shadd, the wife of a great-grandson of Abraham and Harriet.

With Reverend Simpson

By virtue of her family's continued connections within the abolition movement, Shadd met Henry Livingston Simpson of Raleigh Township, Pennsylvania, marrying him on July 3, 1862.



Reverend Henry Simpson. Colgate University.

Reverend Simpson had studied at Madison College (now Colgate University, Madison, New York), where he earned an undergraduate degree in 1853, despite calls for his expulsion by their southern donors. He added to this accomplishment in 1855, earning a theology degree. Abolitionist statesman Frederick Douglass "cited him as a positive example in support of expanded higher education opportunities for African American men," according to Colgate University. He was ordained as a Baptist minister in New York, 1856, and then in Ohio by 1859. His first wedding, to Harriet Bogart in 1857, drew an audience that included United States Secretary of State William H. Seward. The two had a child in 1859, and Harriet died in 1860.

Emeline and Henry welcomed their first child, Harriett "Hattie" B. Simpson on January 17, 1863 in New York City. Their second child, Ada, was born in Cincinnati around 1868. Reverend Simpson was elected president of the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention in 1869, holding the position until 1871.

The family moved to Savannah, Georgia in 1871, after Reverend Simpson was called to the charge of the Second African Baptist Church. Their third child, Charles, was born around 1872. Simpson left the Second African Baptist Church in 1878, returning north, but resumed his position in 1879. Emeline and Henry became grandparents in 1880.

During their time in Georgia, Emeline "traveled to the Sea Islands off Georgia to teach former slaves to read," according to an online exhibit from Toronto Public Library.

Henry died in 1881. The church received special permission from Savannah's mayor to keep Simpson's body in state for a week, "thereby affording his mourning congregation and large circle of friends the opportunity of showing due respect to the dead, and insuring a proper removal to his last resting place in the far North, whence he came, and nobly ministered for us to the end." His remains were escorted north to North Buxton, Ontario, where the Shadd family lived.

Back in Canada

In 1883, Emeline Shadd Simpson organized the Women's Home Mission Society. One of her sisters, Elizabeth Shreve, was elected the organization's president.

Arlie C. Robbins' 1983 book *Legacy to Buxton* notes Emeline's own unfortunate end in 1894, "as told by the Shadd family and Frank L. Morris, Mary Simpson's brother."

> It is fortunate that the Shadds were a hardy and prolific family for they would suffer many tragedies. They lived very near the railroad and it would be through this old enemy that they would suffer some of their greatest losses.
>
> First, it had cut across their farm and as it passed through their fields it frequently gave off sparks that would set their ready to harvest crops afire. This resulted in numerous lawsuits, most of which they lost.
>
> In 1894, Emmeline [sic] Shadd Simpson, widow of Rev. Henry Simpson, and her daughter-in-law, Mary Morris Simpson, had spent the evening with

Emmeline's daughter Ada, William Shadd's wife. In order to get home, they had to cross the railroad tracks which were just a few feet beyond the gate.

Just as it still is on most country roads, there were no signals at the crossing to warn of an approaching train but even so they had lived beside the railroad since it had been built and they were well aware of the times that the passenger and express trains were due.

As they climbed in the horse-drawn buggy and said their goodbyes, Ada went as far as the gate to open it for them. As they drove the few feet towards the crossing, a train roared by. Ada waited in the darkness by the gate believing that they too had seen the train and had waited until it passed. But Emmeline and young Mary had been struck by the train! For one brief moment they forgot to watch for the train which passed by at the same time every night.

Wild with grief, Ada found them dead and dying on the far side of the track where they had been thrown by the engine. Young Mary's heartbroken mother would regret all her life that she had not let her missionary-minded daughter go to Africa to help in the various missions, believing it to be too dangerous.

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Section: "Emeline in Peel"

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"Education and freedom" page of Freedom City: Uncovering Toronto’s Black History, Toronto ON: Toronto Public Library, 2015.
“Death of a Colored Preacher,” Savannah Morning News, 9 March 1881, page 3.
David Allison, Sr. and Rev. Francis Keaton, Committee, “A Card.” (letter), Savannah Morning News, 21 March 1881, page 3.
“Death of a Prominent Colored Baptist Minister,” Savannah Morning News, 12 March 1881, page 3.

Section: "Back in Canada"

Arlie C. Robbins, *Legacy to Buxton*, North Buxton, Ont. : A.C. Robbins, 1983, pages 108-109.
Robbins, page 37-38, citing “as told by the Shadd family and Frank L. Morris, Mary Simpson’s brother.”

Further reading

"Class of '67," an interactive story by Village at Black Creek. Chapter Four of "Ruth Barrow" references Emeline.

Annalise Simons, "Henry Livingston Simpson: First known African American graduate," Colgate University.

Further opportunities for research

Region of Peel Archives would love to connect with the Shadd family, for additional information.

Research into the McGregors – whom Emeline references -- may also provide answers. The family may appear in land and school records.

Brampton

Charles Kelly

Charles Kelly was by no means Brampton's first Black businessperson. Saddle and harness maker Duncan Gilchrist was established by at least 1859, the same year stonemason Samuel Branton purchased land for his family.

However, the barber shop Kelly founded remained a mainstay in the young village of Brampton for nearly 38 years, from 1876 to 1914. During that time, he periodically returned to work with his older brother, William, at the shop and also performed in local venues.

Mother's escape from enslavement

Kelly's parents, Harriet Powell and Henry Kelly, were married in 1840.

Harriet's story is well documented. Her Mississippi enslavers brought her with them on an 1839 trip to Syracuse, New York, a community that served as a hub for abolitionist activity and as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Hotel employees offered to help her escape, to which she cautiously agreed, knowing that she'd never see her enslaved mother and sister again. Dressed in a man's hat and coat, she was hurried out of the hotel to safety.

$200 Reward

Left the service of the subscriber on the evening of the 7th inst. a Bright Quadroon Servant-girl, about twenty four years of age, named HARRIET. Said girl was about 5 feet high, of a full and well proportioned form, straight light brown hair, dark eyes, approaching to black, of fresh complexion, and so fair that she would generally be taken for white; a prominent mouth with depressed nostrils and receding forehead, readily betrayed to the critical observer the leading traits of the African race. Her demeanor is very quiet, and her deportment modest.

At the time of leaving she had on a black dress of figured poplin. She took with her one green Merino dress; one pink Gingham (checked) do.; one French Muslin figured do.; one Buff, and one light purple Calico do. She wore small rings (with stones) in her ears, and had three chased Gold Rings on her fingers, two of which were set with green and the other with transparent chrystal. She also took with her a plaid blanket Shawl, but left her bonnet, so that her head-dress cannot be described.

In leaving the service of the subscriber, she leaves her aged mother and a younger sister, who are devotedly attached to her, and to whom she has ever appeared much attached. It may be proper also to state, that her conduct as a servant, and her moral deportment so far as the same have come to the knowledge of the subscriber, have hitherto been irreproachable. It is believed that she has been spirited away from the service of the undersigned, by the officious and persevering efforts of certain malicious and designing persons, operating through the agency of the colored people of Syracuse, at which place he had been induced to spend a few days. The subscriber would further add, that he has refused several importunate offers of $2,500 for said girl, for the sole reason that he would never consent to part her from the other members of her family, and it is chiefly with the hope of restoring her to her aged mother and sister, who will be plunged in sorrow at the separation, that this notice is published. The above reward of Two Hundred Dollars will be paid to any person who will deliver said girl to the proprietor Syracuse House, in Syracuse, or one hundred D[illegible] any one who will give such information as shall lead to her

[illegible]use, October 9th, 1[illegible]

J. DAVENPORT

Her enslaver issued a poster for her capture, which survives in the collection of the Onondaga Historical Association:

Harriet eventually made her way north to Kingston, Ontario.

A play about Harriet's decision to escape, *Possessing Harriet*, was first staged in 2018.

Early years

Records show that the Kelly family lived near Queen and Bagot Streets in Kingston on land now a municipal parking lot opposite St. Paul's Anglican Church.

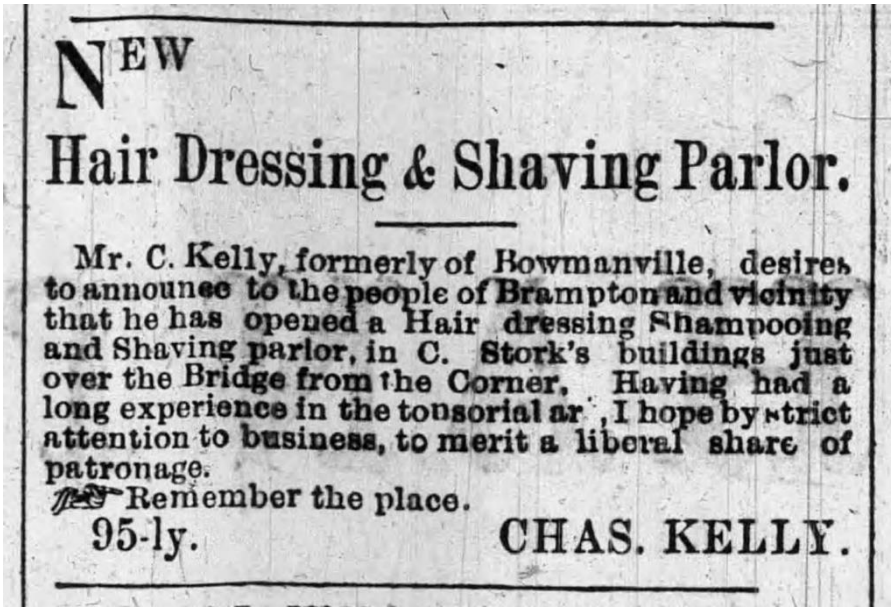
The family home miraculously survived a massive fire, just a few buildings away, when Charles was just three. The 1854 blaze engulfed a number of structures.

Harriet died in 1859 or 1860, and Henry died in 1874 at Bowmanville.

By the 1871 census, the Kelly family was still living together, with William listed as head of the household. Both William, aged 30, and his brother Charles, 20, were working as barbers.

The next year, Charles married Pennsylvania-born Esther Welch. While she was living in Kingston, he had already moved to Bowmanville. They welcomed their first child, Harriet Rebecca "Hattie" Kelly, in 1874, during a period when they were living and operating a barber shop in Bowmanville.

By 1876, older brother William H. Kelly was working as a hairdresser in Ottawa, directly opposite Parliament Hill. That same year, Charles started a business in Brampton within "Stork's buildings."



NEW

Hair Dressing & Shaving Parlor.

Mr. C. Kelly, formerly of Bowmanville, desires to announce to the people of Brampton and vicinity that he has opened a Hair dressing Shampooing and Shaving parlor, in C. Stork's buildings just over the Bridge from the Corner. Having had a long experience in the tonsorial ar , I hope by strict attention to business, to merit a liberal share of patronage.

☞ Remember the place.

95-ly. CHAS. KELLY.

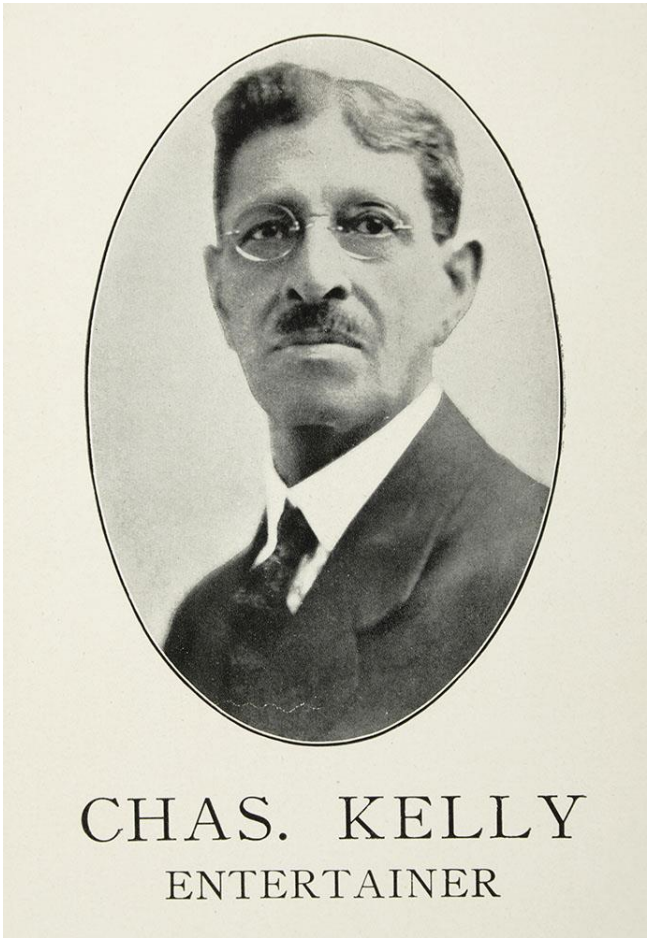
The Conservator, 13 October 1876, page 3.

Sources such as land records suggest that Stork's buildings were located on the south side of Queen Street West, just past Main Street South. Today, the unit houses the restaurant King Falooda, but from 1967 to 2021 it was home to Savy Barber Shop.

Charles sold the business to his brother William in the spring of 1877. Operating first from that location and later from premises near the Dominion Building, William continued the business until retiring due to health issues in 1914, when he sold the firm.

Collingwood is Charles' next known location, with the earliest confirmation of his new town in 1879. He left in 1882 to study music in Toronto, receiving a fond send off from his Presbyterian church choir. The family then moved from Collingwood back to Brampton, living locally from around 1884 to 1885, before returning to Collingwood.

Charles' wife, Esther, died in 1885, and he returned his young family of five children, aged 4 to 11, to Brampton once again. He became the Presbyterian Church choir leader in 1886.



Poster of Charles Kelly, ca. 1900.
Courtesy of Guelph Museums, 1978.16.4.

National touring singer

All this time, Charles grew in recognition as a performer. One 1886 article noted “His voice is deep, rich and powerful in tone, commanding a range which is unsurpassed by any other bass soloist in the Dominion [of Canada]. His first solo, ‘The Skipper,’ was sung in a manner that fairly took the audience by storm.”

This acclaim led to his sharing a bill with other notable acts of the era, including the Telgmann family, whose operettas were popular on Canadian stages of the era.

While he had performed sporadically to this point, in 1887 he began organized tours with other acts, often including elocutionists, who were speakers famed for the precision of their delivery.

Charles moved his family to Winnipeg in June 1888, and found work as a professional singer at concerts, society events, and churches. His performances were frequently listed in the pages of local newspapers, often multiple times each week. From Winnipeg, he travelled to other western Canada communities such as Qu’Appelle, Regina, and Moose Jaw.

Charles moved to Chicago in 1891, and after an Ontario tour in 1892, he returned to Winnipeg. He then moved to Montreal in 1894, playing a variety of shows, as well as performing solos weekly at the Dominion Square Methodist Church.

His daughter Hattie, “a sweet contralto singer,” regularly toured with her father to perform at the same concerts beginning in 1896. That same year, Charles married Massachusetts-born Maude Whelden. Maude remarried to a New Yorker in 1904,

Dominion Square Methodist Church.
Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Album Massicotte 2731125

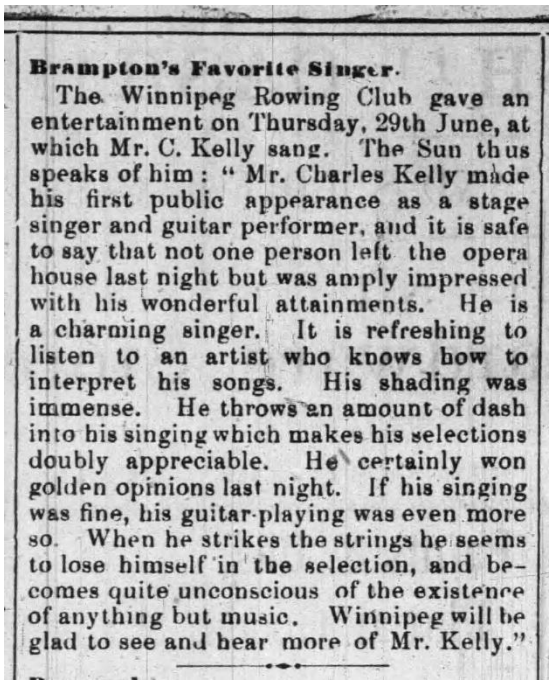
In 1897, he was hired as leader of psalmody, responsible for leading congregational psalm singing, as well as choir instructor at Guelph's Knox Church in 1897. He married his third wife, Fanny Madeline Wright, at First Presbyterian Church in London, Ontario, 1903.

For years, Charles and Hattie lived on the same street in Guelph, Woolwich, before eventually sharing a home, where they taught music.

In 1922, Charles was hired by Acton's Knox Church to lead its choir. He remained in Guelph, commuting on Thursdays to teach and on Sundays to lead congregational singing. By 1930, Charles advertised himself in Guelph's city directory as a "musician, teacher of fretted instruments, tuning and repairing, radio supplies."

Charles died in Guelph on January 25, 1942, at the age of 92. His daughter Hattie died shortly thereafter on May 26, aged 68.

Right, Charles and Hattie Kelly, ca. 1910. Courtesy of Guelph Museums, 1978.16.5.



Brampton's Favorite Singer.

The Winnipeg Rowing Club gave an entertainment on Thursday, 29th June, at which Mr. C. Kelly sang. The Sun thus speaks of him: "Mr. Charles Kelly made his first public appearance as a stage singer and guitar performer, and it is safe to say that not one person left the opera house last night but was amply impressed with his wonderful attainments. He is a charming singer. It is refreshing to listen to an artist who knows how to interpret his songs. His shading was immense. He throws an amount of dash into his singing which makes his selections doubly appreciable. He certainly won golden opinions last night. If his singing was fine, his guitar-playing was even more so. When he strikes the strings he seems to lose himself in the selection, and becomes quite unconscious of the existence of anything but music. Winnipeg will be glad to see and hear more of Mr. Kelly."

"Brampton's favorite singer"[1]

While an exhaustive survey of Charles Kelly's performances in all nine Canadian provinces is beyond the scope of this publication, this section focuses on his known appearances in Peel County.

In the days before public healthcare, groups like the Independent Order of Forsters acted as "mutual organizations," extending the concept of insurance to working class families. Their community spirit also extended to celebration, staging an 1879 event at the Brampton Fairgrounds ending with a "musical treat in the evening." Among the performers was "a well known favorite, Chas Kelly, now of Collingwood." The acts were all "repeatedly encored."

The Conservator, 6 July 1888, page 3.

[1] Canadian newspapers of the time would sometimes use American spellings. Being a direct quote, we've continued that spelling.

Charles also performed at an 1882 garden party held by the Excelsior Lacrosse club. He was listed as one of the "leading vocalists of the town," suggesting he had returned to work at his brother's business. The same year, a Forsters' Concert at Brampton Concert Hall included a list of singers from Buffalo, Hamilton, and Toronto, with Charles as the only local voice.

Described as "The greatest event probably in the history of Claireville," the opening of the community's new Church of England in June 1883 drew significant attention. Charles was one of the soloists. At least three more garden parties that summer featured his singing, including a fundraiser for fire uniforms.

Often on the same bill as Al Williams, the duo organized and performed in "a grand concert" that October at Brampton's Concert Hall. Kelly performed there again on New Year's Eve.

In May 1884, a Brampton local paper shared:

> Mr. Chas Kelly, our talented singer, has left Brampton for the summer. He has gone to his home in Collingwood. Charley leaves many friends behind him here.

He was back for another grand concert, that October.

He headlined an Orangeville concert in January 1885, with the local newspaper writing:

> Mr. Kelly has a powerful and musical bass voice, excellently cultivated under perfect control, and these with distinct enunciation and a modest [unreadable, ends "aring"], make listening to his singing a delight.

Kelly passed through Brampton in April, en route to Stratford for a concert.

The popular Telgmann family performed in Brampton in 1886 for the benefit of the Mechanics' Institute, which operated the local library, and Charles appeared on the program as well. Both the Anglican and Presbyterian churches also featured him in concert. By the summer, he began offering instruction in singing, guitar, and zither.

By 1887, Charles was touring with noted elocutionist "Mrs. T. Charles Watson," making Brampton their last Canadian stop before heading abroad. After the summer tour, he returned to work at Kelly's Shaving Parlor.

In early 1888, he toured with the Beethoven Quartette Club, in which he was "rapturously received" in Brampton and towns throughout western Ontario. That year in June, a performance in Brampton was noted as his last before a tour of "Manitoba and the Northwest with his Concert Company. Charlie will do well."

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Further opportunities for research

Guelph Civic Museums: This collection has a variety of materials, likely donated by the family. While some items consist of newspaper clippings now available in other formats, others are unique to the museum’s holdings and may contain additional information.

Online: An archives staff member has been compiling a much larger listing of Kelly’s press mentions beyond Peel, based on the content on Newspapers.com